

Reflection of Life in Music

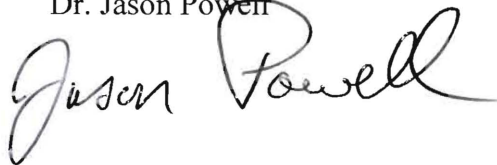
An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Powell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "J" and "P".

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Abstract

Music is often a way to express one's feelings and life experiences. I used this medium to develop and perform an hour-long senior percussion recital. The pieces involved each depict a certain aspect of my life, and were chosen for specific reasons with these depictions in mind. The artist statement delves into detail for each of these pieces, as well as the process of preparing for a solo recital, and accompanies the enclosed DVD of the recital.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Jason Powell for helping to guide me through this project and statement as my advisor, as well as being an amazing professor and inspiration throughout my four years here at Ball State.

I would like to thank Dr. Erwin C. Mueller, the studio professor running the percussion studio at Ball State. Without his guidance since my senior year of high school, this project would not have been possible, in multiple ways. He is an incredible musician, and a wonderful individual who has pushed me to be the best possible all-around person that I can be.

have performed, my grandparents have jokingly asked me each year if I was going to play *Bolero* as my snare solo, knowing that it is rhythmically one of the most boring solos to play due to the repetitive nature of the piece.

My grandparents have been some of my greatest supporters in my life, always encouraging me in all of my musical endeavors. Even though I moved to Indiana while still in high school, they have traveled almost halfway across the country from Philadelphia every year since then, in order to watch me perform. They always encouraged me to listen to music as a child, and they introduced me to forms of music and art that I might not otherwise have appreciated or experienced. While I remember sometimes complaining about being bored listening to classical music on the drives with them to visit family, I have no doubt that being regularly exposed to classical music and jazz as a child gave me a greater appreciation for it as I got older. As a token of how much they have influenced my musical career, I chose *Excerpt Etude* to perform for my senior recital, and dedicated the piece to them during the recital.

As a whole, my senior recital was an expression of who I am as a person, how I have grown as a musician, and homage to those who have influenced me throughout my life. The process of developing the recital along with the ability to choose my own literature helped to develop my sense of musicality. The process also developed my willingness to challenge myself, rather than being content with performing at a mediocre level. The pieces definitely left me frustrated at times, but the ability to share my feelings and experiences with the audience through my musical performance was well worth it.

Works Cited

“Excerpt Etude for Snare Drum.” *Snare Drum Solos*. HoneyRock Publishing, Inc. 2012

Web. 20 Oct 2012.

“Ilijas.” *Ilijas by Nebojsa Zivkovic*. Steve Weiss Music, Inc. 2012. Web. 20 Oct 2012

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“When words leave off, music begins”

-Heinrich Heine

For as long as I can remember, music has always been an important part of my life. No matter what family member I was with at the time, music was always involved. With my grandparents, it was listening to jazz music over dinner and listening to classical stations on long drives. With my parents, it was the instantly recognizable sounds of classic rock and 80's pop. With this family history, it was inevitable that I would be involved in music somehow in my life. The combination of all of these influences that led me into joining band in middle school has culminated in a final hour-long senior percussion recital under the direction of Dr. Erwin C. Mueller.

This senior recital was the result of hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of practice over the course of my senior year at Ball State University. I had already presented freshman, sophomore, and junior recitals, but the senior recital was my last chance to express my own musicality and preferences in percussion music. The process began mere weeks after my junior recital wrapped up, and my first task was choosing new literature to perform. Each recital is expected to contain a combination of mallet pieces, snare pieces, and timpani pieces. The process of choosing music took approximately three weeks, during which I read through multiple pieces on each instrument before making a final decision. I finally chose three marimba solos, one vibraphone solo (similar to a metal xylophone), a snare drum solo, and a timpani and trumpet duet. My personal preference in the world of percussion instruments is the marimba, which is often referred to as a “xylophone-on-steroids.” There's something about the earthy timbre¹ that makes me enjoy playing the marimba more than any other instrument.

After choosing my repertoire, I was responsible for creating my own practice schedule in which to adhere in order to ensure that I would be well prepared when the recital date approached. I am very rigid and methodical when creating practice schedule, and my view on how practice time should be divided up has been heavily influenced by a

¹ The characteristic quality or tone color of an instrument

lecture I attended by Steve Davis, a collegiate director of bands in Kansas. He advocated ranking the music based on level of difficulty as well as length, and then calculating the amount of practice time until the performance. He then prescribed a mathematical process of deciding how much time should be given to each piece compared to the total amount of practice time available. With this in mind, I practiced for approximately two to three hours a day, typically taking Sundays off for focus on projects in other classes. I often practiced the mallet pieces on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and some Saturdays, while the drum pieces were relegated to Tuesdays, Thursdays, and the occasional Saturday.

I believe that alternating the days in which I rehearsed gave my brain a chance to process what I worked on with each instrument, putting it away into my long-term memory. The alternating process also allowed me to continue playing without unnecessarily straining my wrists. I have struggled throughout my college career with tendonitis in my wrists, especially when playing challenging four-mallet marimba material. The tendonitis stems from a drum corps audition that I attended while in high school. They advocated a different playing technique than I was used to, which caused a lot of damage to my wrists. I have had physical therapy sessions to work on stemming the progression of the damage, but the rest of the healing process is dependent on how careful I am about my practice regimen and the physical care of my wrists.

In addition to my practice regimen, I was also responsible for preparing the pieces incrementally for my weekly lessons with Dr. Mueller. These lessons, required for any student who is in the process of developing a recital, helped to push my musical boundaries even further. The lessons with Dr. Mueller were each an hour long and focused on the little details, while my practice sessions were centered on the long-term big picture. We would often work on only one measure at a time, focusing on the small nuances that took the music from merely playable to musical. The lessons, along with the challenging music, worked to push my level of musicality from the previous recital to the next. The focus was less on the notes and more on the message that the notes conveyed. *Did I want to slow down in an area to draw the harmonic moment out, or did I want to push through it to get to the next idea? Did I want to emphasize this note or that note?* Asking these questions forced me to look past music as simply notes on a page. Music

can tell a story, and my performance and interpretation of a musical piece changes the way the story is told. A story sounds much different coming from a new-to-reading first-grader than it does coming from a trained orator. My goal was to attain the level of a trained orator, someone who can draw the audience into my story.

In reality, I chose music that would tell my story - as a musician and as a human being. When I hear music, especially instrumental music, I often see colors and pictures in my head, and my goal is to express these pictures through my literature choices and performance so that the audience can see what I see. For the recital, the first mallet solo that I chose was *Ilijas* by Nebojsa Zivkovic. The piece is designed to portray a Slavic village that Zivkovic visited, but for me, it was much more personal than that. I had originally planned on playing it at my junior recital, but a flare-up of the tendonitis that entire semester meant I was only able to play for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. This limitation prevented me from working beyond the first half of this piece. As a result, I began to view this piece as a personal challenge, because it was the last piece that I was working on before I had to stop playing. The introduction is very slow and lyrical, with a pattern that works its way through multiple keys and scales. It has a very melancholy feel, which I believed portrayed my feelings of depression at not being able to play for so long. The middle section is more joyful, but rhythmically uneven and off-kilter. This musical contradiction fit very well with the fact that I could occasionally play, but that I was nowhere near the regularity and stamina that I once had obtained. The piece ends with a recap of the opening section, slowing to fade out at the end. Knowing that I would likely not be able to play at this level forever, due to shifting gears into a focus on teaching over performing, lent a bittersweet feeling to being able to finally finish the piece.

Gordon's Bicycle-Downhill by Kevin Bobo is the second movement of a challenging four-mallet marimba piece. The pace of the music is rapid and the music almost never stops throughout the whole movement. The topsy-turvy pace and feel of the music represented my hectic lifestyle during college. I have always taken a full course load, if not an overload, while typically working two or three jobs at the same time. This lifestyle led to me often feeling like I was in over my head, like I was constantly rushing from one task to another, barely keeping up. This piece was a huge technical challenge

because playing it correctly requires almost perfect single-alternating² stroke technique from mallet to mallet. At the time, I was a strong player in pieces that require more double-vertical³ strokes, but my independent strokes were not as strong in extended passages. This piece was essentially nothing but an extended passage, in that these patterns and mallet strokes encompassed the entire piece.

October Night-Mvt II by Michael Burritt is a strong contrast to the other two marimba pieces. This piece is comprised almost entirely of rolled notes, leading to a stream of sound that rarely stops. The pace is much slower than the others, and calls for a lot of leniency with the tempo when moving from section to section. Even though *October Night* is easier from a technical standpoint, the musicality aspect is much more difficult than many other pieces. In pieces that have more rapid notes, the transition from measure to measure can be overlooked more often without disrupting the flow of the piece. Since this piece hinges on the smoothness of the transitions, I had to work on my ability to connect phrases and think of it as a whole piece, rather than section after section. This piece served as my reminder that though life never stops around me, it is important to occasionally move at my own pace and take time to slow down and be more at peace with the world around me. This piece focuses more on musicality than on technique, which pushed me to go beyond simply playing the notes on the page.

On vibraphone, I chose a transcription of Claude Debussy's *Claire de Lune*. All of the tonal characteristics of the piece are still present, but they are condensed into a smaller range to fit into 3.5 octaves instead of 6. I love the simplistic beauty of the Impressionist era, of which Debussy is one of the most well-known composers. The harmonic structure is fairly repetitive throughout the piece, but because Debussy intricately mixes up the patterns within that structure, the piece is challenging to play. Those challenges are mainly a component of mental focus. Many of the sections within the piece are similar, especially in the harmonic accompaniment that is played with the left hand, but the right hand notes and patterns often change from section to section. Keeping these configurations straight in my head so that I did not repeat sections was the biggest challenge. It was also technically difficult, considering that the piece is

² Single notes played with the same hand, with mallets alternating

³ Two notes played simultaneously with the same hand

condensing from a 10-finger piano piece to a 4-mallet vibraphone piece. While practicing, I would often get my mallets tangled up, which forced me to create a new process of mapping the sticking patterns that I used. This piece pays homage to the fact that I grew up listening to both classical and jazz, and I believe that a lot of the jazz music I listened to was strongly influenced by the Impressionist characteristics that are found in Debussy's music. I also love the idea of taking something well known, like *Claire de Lune* is, and updating it or changing its presentation into something unexpected.

Fanfare and Allegro by Stanley Leonard is a timpani and trumpet duet that has many tonal difficulties throughout. In the introduction, the timpani and trumpet trade back and forth, retaining a certain level of independence from each other. Each player has her own line to play, and the audience can hear that the players are working to highlight their particular instrument. After the introduction, however, the piece intertwines the timpani and trumpet line, often echoing from one instrument to the other. My performance was a challenge because typically I perform pieces with other people in which I am clearly the soloist and the other players are accompanists. The process of balancing two parts of equal importance was something that I was unaccustomed to in a recital setting. I believe that finding this balance highlights the idea that while I am a fiercely independent individual and prefer to do things on my own and do them my own way, I have learned to rely on others and trust others to work with me, especially since getting married.

The final piece in my recital was *Excerpt Etude for Snare Drum* by Matthew Beck. The premise of this piece is that Beck has taken short excerpts (sections of 1 to 4 measures) from famous snare drum parts in orchestral literature to create one cohesive snare drum solo. While I had heard this piece performed once before, my main motivation behind choosing it was the inclusion of the snare part of Ravel's *Bolero*. In *Bolero*, there is a single snare player in the middle of the ensemble who plays the same two measures over and over again for the entirety of the 17-minute performance. *Bolero* is challenging for a snare player in that it requires exquisite dynamic, or volume, control. The player starts very quietly, almost to the point of being inaudible, and slowly gets louder over the course of the 17 minutes. Even the slightest hiccup in rhythm or dynamic control can be immediately obvious to the audience. As a running joke for each recital I

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